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Review: Leaders of Democracy

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The Age of Jackson by Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr.

Woodrow Wilson and the People by H. C. F. Bell

Fighting Liberal: The Autobiography of George W. Norris by George W. Norris

Tom Paine, America's Godfather by W. E. Woodward

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REVIEWS

LEADERS OF DEMOCRACY*

Unfortunately the word "politician" has acquired an unsavory connotation in American history and this accident deprives the American language of a suitable name for the able and conscientious administrator of government. The better meaning of the word has application today because the pre-atomic age—if the term is to be accepted—was an age of political leadership, whether it were the totalitarian type of Hitler, Mussolini and Stalin or the more democratic type of Churchill and Roosevelt. In evaluating the accomplishments of the late President, one naturally turns to the earlier American politicians. Using the term in a good sense, Jefferson was perhaps our greatest politician in the presidency. Among the holders of other offices our history shows a list of political leaders that includes Alexander Hamilton, Henry Clay, John Calhoun, Joseph Cannon, to mention only a few. The glory of a great politician in a democracy lies in his ability to furnish leadership for good, while he uses his own political power to preserve the rights of the people against injustice. The emergence of eminent politicians in the period now closing has evoked in the historians of the day a new interest in the traditional political heroes of the United States.

1. Mr. Schlesinger takes for his hero Andrew Jackson, one of the most remarkable men in nineteenth century America. Claude Bowers has made Jackson a lovable "King Andrew," giving color to the more careful study of John S. Bassett. Schlesinger sees in Jackson a symbol of democratic revolt against economic oppression, and finds in the rough old General greater political wisdom and much less of the frontiersman than do most of the traditional historians. He does not profess to write a biography. He writes of an age in which certain notions of government were at the core of most of the political controversies in the United States. To set the stage for the chief controversy of the time he drops back to the over-told battle of Jefferson and Hamilton and accepts the haloed Jefferson. Jackson then becomes the later embodiment of Jeffersonian democracy. Schlesinger dodges the fact that Jackson's actual election was brought about by a sectional political deal and, except in his treatment of the bank fight, does not indicate very explicitly how Jackson lost the handicaps of this deal to become a political leader in his own right. He is undoubtedly correct in making Jackson represent the rise of the common man and the

*1. Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr.: *The Age of Jackson*. (Boston: Little, Brown & Co., 1945. Pp. xiv, 577. \$5.00).

2. H. C. F. Bell: *Woodrow Wilson and the People*. (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, Doran and Company, Inc., 1945. Pp. 392. \$3.00).

3. *Fighting Liberal: the Autobiography of George W. Norris*. (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1945. Pp. xiv, 419. \$3.50).

4. W. E. Woodward: *Tom Paine, America's Godfather*. (New York: E. P. Dutton & Company, 1945. Pp. 359. \$3.50).

popular reaction to bureaucracy and political compromise. The author narrates with smoothness and concrete picturesqueness based upon close reading of local sources the interplay of personalities and sectional interests. Van Buren to him was not an American Talleyrand but a rather guileless friend of the people; Henry Clay becomes more frothy but a bit more consistent; and the Kitchen Cabinet becomes a political necessity when the real cabinet was so colorless.

Schlesinger proposes two main paradoxes. The first is that Jackson, the hero of the west, was fighting chiefly the battle of the dispossessed of the eastern states. The idea fits very well into the political deal that sealed the election of 1828, the exaggerated democracy of Brownson's essay on "The Laboring Classes" and the bunkum of the election of 1840. The second thesis is that Jackson sought hard money as a protection for the poor and indebted classes. The paradoxical element in this disappears if one forgets the later Populist propaganda and sees the Bank of the United States as a manipulator of currency which sought to garner thereby unearned income from the masses of the people. The only serious objection to these opinions of Mr. Schlesinger is that they pre-suppose a depth of knowledge in political and economic theory in Jackson hardly in keeping with the rough "Hero of the Battle of New Orleans."

In general, while Mr. Schlesinger has given a brilliant and new exposition of the political and economic struggles in the United States before the Civil War, his larger thesis must be qualified in many details. For instance, he fails to fit the Brahmins of New England literature into his story. His limitations on the frontier contribution to the rise of the common man is most welcome, because most of our rugged pioneers were usually persons of some means seeking to better their economic status. The really oppressed did not have the means of going west. And the equal-rights idea of the frontier included the notion that each pioneer seeking his fortune in the west was in his own mind as much a potential capitalist as his neighbor. Mr. Schlesinger did not increase the value of his study by his essays at the end of the volume. He becomes quite pedestrian and repetitious in them. Neither should he have gone beyond the real "Age of Jackson." Obviously, Mr. Schlesinger has the recent political struggles and personalities in mind throughout his writing, but only occasionally does he forget that he is writing about the eighteen thirties and not about the parallel events of a century later.

2. Professor Herbert Bell has examined another president who is being constantly compared to the late Franklin Delano Roosevelt. Although Professor Bell shows that Wilson regularly appealed to the people against his opponents in the manner of Roosevelt's fireside chats, he does not prove that Wilson really had the following of the people or even their interests at heart like the later president. Wilson's ideas were too abstract and scholarly. More obviously, Professor Bell is interested in the foreign policy of Wilson and the untimely death of Roosevelt will forever make impossible the comparison of the actions of the two leaders in making peace. For that very reason one might question whether the present volume contributes to an understanding of our problems in peace-making. The author makes his interest in Wilson's later years too obvious by rushing through the pre-presidential years in two chapters. He

writes smoothly and is in general a scholar writing for well-read people, yet his failure to identify the authorities for so many quotations is quite irritating. His complete opinions on the Wilson-Dean West controversy and on the nature of advanced study would be very interesting, judging from the frequent jabs at Dean West's actual accomplishments.

Professor Bell clearly intended his study to be sympathetic with Wilson's ideals and to some extent, even with Wilson. But it is doubtful that he will make converts to that point of view. Wilson emerges as a stern Presbyterian preacher, narrow, uncompromising and self opinionated. Professor Bell shows that Wilson's ideals were high both in domestic and foreign affairs, but in so doing he tends to play down the president's defects. Wilson was definitely unfriendly to the Irish in his earlier writings. Dr. Bell's digressions upon the deficiencies of the hyphenates contain an unconscious pre-supposition that the English-Americans are not hyphenates because they were given the name Yankee by the non-hyphenate Indians. But Lodge was not a hyphenate and there were many other non-hyphenate politicians from the West, South and East who opposed Wilson. Professor Bell is correctly desirous of a better American foreign policy, but when the executive of that policy lacks the essential qualities of successful political leadership, he, and not his opponents, should be blamed for his failures.

3. During the forty years of his public life, Senator George Norris changed in the public opinion from a radical to a progressive to a liberal. As he tells his own story, he is a consistent liberal all the time. Of course, no public official in our history has yet been consistently good, but the deficiencies and the defections in Senator Norris's career are excusable in a man who was almost self-made. If one uses the word liberal in its limited meaning, his dedication to liberal ideas is very laudable. George Norris had not a complete liberal philosophy. His political reasonings consisted in a great forbearance for the faults of others and a special desire to better the living conditions of the country in which he lived. Also, he did hate intolerance. He was opposed to any man or institution that seemed to limit the betterment of the common man. He fulfilled the definition of a good politician because he achieved political power and used it for the protection of the rights of the people against injustice and oppression. There is a striking similarity between this autobiography and that of the late Monsignor John A. Ryan. Both were liberal in the sense of the word that is free from license. Each was responsible for legislation for the betterment of the American common people.

4. Just why Mr. Woodward wants to prove that Thomas Paine was America's godfather is not clear, nor to whom he wants to prove it. The tone and quality of the book generally are puerile, although the volume is not one to be recommended to children. Thomas Paine's *Common Sense* did play a very important part in the American Revolution, but the author does not explain the circumstances beyond the already known. His later writings, likewise, need to be evaluated in relation to the other political philosophers of the day. Mr. Woodward is not qualified for such a scholarly task. His belabored proofs that Paine was not an atheist, far from proving his point, merely raise questions about the theism of Mr. Woodward.—THOMAS T. McAVOY, C.S.C.